

Developing a Well-Sound Communication Style for Effective Leadership in a Multicultural Context

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Abstract

A multicultural context is complex as it regroups people from different parts of the world, cultures, religions, and academic domains. In a multicultural context, people in one way or another expose their perspectives, uniqueness, and differences to one another, sometimes in a conflictive way, if good mechanisms for maintaining communal harmony and mutual acceptance are not developed. This paper aims to show that a well-sound communication style conditions effective leadership in a multicultural context, since a multicultural context presents a lot of complex situations. The central question is: how can Christian leaders effectively boost their leadership with a well-sound communication style in a multicultural context? Through exploring scholarly research, this paper has found that a well-sound communication style has three major components: (1) the ability to understand personal identity and others' cultural patterns, (2) the ability to develop personal intercultural values, and (3) the ability to establish personal communication manners.

Keywords: *global context, communication style, and effective leadership.*

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I. Introduction

A multicultural context is complex as it regroups people from different parts of the world, cultures, religions, and academic levels. In a multicultural context, people in one way or another expose their perspectives, uniqueness, and differences to one another, sometimes in a conflictive way, if good mechanisms for maintaining communal harmony and mutual acceptance are not developed. For this paper, a multicultural context is any context such as organizations, churches, schools, or any other human associations where people from different backgrounds, religions, cultures, and nationalities are gathered and work or live together. I consider effective leadership in the multicultural context as a leadership, which leads the followers from point A to point B in communal harmony and mutual acceptance without discrimination.

Research has proved that 'hardly a day goes by without media reports on corporate misbehavior and scandals' in different multicultural organizations (Crane et al., 2013, p. 1). This shows how crucial it is to learn and be prepared for effective leadership in multicultural contexts. Way to avoid this misbehavior and scandals, Christian leaders need to keep a regular personal examination of their leadership progress concerning their given responsibility and test their communication style to know if it is promoting communal harmony and mutual acceptance among the followers.

A leader is someone with great responsibility toward others, being the one to lead and influence others to fulfill the vision of the group or organization and to allow others to reach their full potential. One of the great ways to help others progress is to be able to know yourself, your passion, strengths, and weaknesses so that you can listen and lead others objectively.

Leaders must know themselves thoroughly before they can hope to lead others. This self-knowledge comes through listening to your inner voice, accepting responsibility for who you are, learning in greater depth than the average person, and reflecting on the unique experiences you have had throughout your life. Mistakes are inevitable, but they, too, contribute to your growth and development. You must also know the world as thoroughly as you know yourself. World knowledge comes through a host of experiences, including extensive travel, a rewarding private life, key associations with mentors and groups, and continuing education. You must allow yourself to emerge as a leader by applying to the way you do your job the wisdom and insight gained from your reflections on life's lessons. Change is the only constant in a leader's life (Bennis, 1989, p. 1).

This paper shows that a well-sound communication style in consideration of self-identity and world knowledge, as mentioned by Bennis (1989) promotes effective leadership in a multicultural context since a multicultural context presents a lot of complex situations. The central question is: how can Christian leaders effectively boost their leadership with a well-sound communication style in a multicultural context? The paper has two major points. Apart from a short introduction and a conclusion, the first point focuses on the complexity of a multicultural context; and the second explains the major components of a well-sound communication style based on self-identity and world knowledge for effective leadership in the multicultural context.

I. The Complexity of Multicultural Contexts

Multicultural contexts present many complex concerns that require deep reflection. In this paper, I will only mention a few to show the general perspectives to expect when working in a multicultural context.

1. Verbal and nonverbal communication

In daily life, individuals use verbal and nonverbal communication to get their ideas understood. And often it becomes a big issue to figure out the meaning of everyone's verbal and nonverbal messages mostly in a multicultural context. Verbal and nonverbal communication are sometimes connected. However, it is often difficult to differentiate verbal to nonverbal communication in other situations or contexts. Verbal communication is done through audible sounds while non-verbal communication is 'the nonverbal intonations, body movements, and specific gestures' (Ting-Toomey, 2022, p. 32) that a person makes. Everyone in concordance with his/her culture has a specific nonverbal communication which can be different from another's culture or has a different meaning while maintaining the same gestures. Periklis Tagkas emphasizes that 'the interaction between verbal and non-verbal communication often determines understanding and perceptions' (2020). That means the way of interpreting someone's verbal and non-verbal message depends on personal perception of the matter or personal experience and background. One of the greatest challenges in multicultural contexts is how to unify verbal and non-verbal communication.

It is important to remember that a person is generally a complex being. Because a person can say a word while his action or gesture communicates the opposite of what is expressed verbally. Phoebe Caldwell said that to better understand people, we should give ourselves 'profound attention to other people through body language' (2007, p. 19) because our feelings are mostly expressed through nonverbal communication.

2. Personality styles and value tendencies (Ting-Toomey, 2022, p. 64)

In a multicultural context, many personality styles and value tendencies are exposed, consciously or unconsciously. Ting-Toomey (2022, p. 64) presents some important realities to consider:

- Independent self-construal person and interdependent self-construal person: The first person refers to someone who generally emphasizes the perspective, which says an individual in society is a unique entity with a personal repertoire of feelings, cognitions, and motivations, which must be valued. The second person emphasizes that an individual is not on his/her own. Instead, he needs to get connected with other members of the group to find personal meaning.

- Horizontal and vertical personality styles: A person with a horizontal personality style prefers equal treatment regardless of a person's status, rank, and age. However, a person with a vertical personality encourages differentiation in individual treatment by giving respect to a person's rank, title, life experiences, and age.

- Uncertainty-oriented person and certainty-oriented person: The first person is ready to directly respond to an uncertain situation by actively seeking out the solution. The second person begins by investigating others' opinions before dealing with a particular situation in the group.

In a multicultural context, people from all those personality styles and value tendencies are represented. However, none of the personality styles and value tendencies are the best. Each one has strengths and weaknesses in the way they are exposed. Therefore, without a clear understanding of these aspects and how they impact people's lives, it will be difficult to cooperate with everyone, and a lot of misunderstandings will arise in a multicultural context.

3. Ethical positionality

Apart from the personality styles and value tendencies that characterize different people in multicultural contexts, there is also the reality of ethical positionality. The choice of ethical positionality differs from one person to the next. Often, in a group, some people prefer a particular ethical positionality in confrontation with others' preferences. Let us review the different ethical positionalities with their specificity developed by Ting Toomey (2022):

- Meta-ethics contextualism position: This position supports the idea that each ethical dilemma is a unique case with unique conditions, and each context is a unique ethical context that deserves the full attention, effort, and time commitment of in-depth, case-by-case analysis. In my understanding, this position reveals that comparison is not always appropriate in similar situations. Because a situation may seem similar, at the same time, each situation has its specific concerns that need a different approach from the other similar situations based on the particularity and nature of the people involved in the two similar situations. Therefore, each situation must be dealt with its particularity, even if there are some aspects of similarity.

- Ethical relativism position: This position emphasizes that each situation must be dealt with based on a particular cultural context where the specific problem is happening. Based on my understanding, this position is

good as it values each cultural context. The only concern with this position is that not all situations are culturally handled with justice. For example, in a particular situation where justice is needed, a particular culture may, however, handle it unjustly, mostly when it regards women and children. Therefore, in such a situation, handling the situation based on cultural norms where people are marginalized will be harmful to some. According to me, before using ethical relativism, reflection must be made to deeply analyze the cultural norms related to each situation.

- Ethical absolutism position: This position emphasizes the principles of right and wrong by a set of universally fixed standards regardless of cultural differences. In my point of view, this position fits mostly in Christian organizations, where whatever the Bible considers as sin must be avoided by everyone regardless of personal cultural patterns. Therefore, whoever accepts to work in a Christian organization must be well prepared regarding the values to be followed by everyone in that organization and be ready to sacrifice personal values tendencies to the obedience of the Christian values adopted by the organization.

- Derived ethical universalism position: This position focuses on developing a set of universal standards to judge good or bad behaviors across countries, and that requires much knowledge about the uniqueness of each culture and, at the same time, underlying deep similarities across cultures to be able to provide the expected result for each situation. This position is greatly demanding in the way it requires a pre-investigation concerning all cultures represented in a particular multicultural context to determine those universal standards to be adopted in the organization.

II. Communication Style for Effective Christian Leadership in a Multicultural Context

After presenting the complexity of a multicultural context, let us explain the major components of a well-sound communication style based on self-identity and world knowledge. I found three components, which I also call major pillars of a well-sound communication style, to be adopted in a multicultural context: (1) the ability to understand personal identity and others' cultural patterns, (2) the ability to develop personal intercultural values as a leader, (3) the ability to establish personal communication manners. In the paragraphs below, I will explain in more detail each component of a well-sound communication style.

The first component: The ability to understand personal identity and others' cultural patterns.

To better understand others, it is very important to first understand ourselves. The leader should start by deeply understanding his/her culture and discovering his/her identity before getting to know others. Personal identities and culture contribute to forming who we are and shaping our interactions with others. Our uniqueness is found in our identities and our culture because the 'human mind is cultural by nature' (Shaules, 2015, p. 22). This means our mind is culturally formed, which contributes to differentiating us from others.

Therefore, the leader should know that his/her identity and culture give meaning to all his/her interactions in a very unique way, which will differentiate him/her from other leaders. At the same time, knowing personal identity and culture helps the leaders to differentiate themselves to their followers' identities and cultures which may lead to mutual acceptance and tolerance. Ting Toomey defines culture as 'a leaned meaning system that consist of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, meanings, and symbols that are passed on from one generation to the next' (Ting-Toomey, 2022, p. 18). This definition brings to mind or emphasizes that it is not easy to disconnect someone from his/her cultural values and patterns. A person is a result of his/her cultural values and patterns, rooted in him/her for many years. However, culture is dynamic. So, everyone can change or shift to other cultural norms and patterns or learn to cooperate with different people regardless of their background, when our world knowledge increases, as Bennis (1989) mentioned. Nevertheless, acculturation should be based on well-established ethical standards.

The dynamism of the culture happens mostly when people interact with other people from different cultures, then they experience the mixing of cultures unconsciously or consciously (Fischer, 2008). Our environment, or the type of people around us has a considerable influence on us. The people with whom we spend most of our time have an important impact on us, consciously or unconsciously toward good or bad. Therefore, the Christian leader willing to understand himself/herself must regularly check on the kind of people surrounding him/her, and then intentionally select people who may exercise the expected influence to strengthen his/her leadership in a multicultural context.

After noticing or identifying personal identity and culture, the Christian leader should now start reviewing personal cultural biases which will also allow him to develop mechanisms for discovering others' cultural biases. First, the best way to check our own biases is to pay attention to how we feel when others say something that we do not view in the same way. If we feel a sense of internal resistance or agitation, that means our beliefs and cultural values are challenged (Doby, 2023). Second, as a leader, the appropriate way to notice others' biases is to pay attention to how people react when your cultural values are exposed to them. The Christian leader should intentionally and regularly pay attention to how people do things because the 'how question' reveals people's feelings and explains the what and why questions (Caldwell, 2007, p. 19). Generally speaking, what we do, gets its full meaning based on how the thing is done and why it is done that way.

At the beginning of my work at Université Chrétienne Bilingue du Congo (UCBC), I experienced some frustrations in different domains. One of them is related to my analysis of different situations. Often, I give a much

consideration to the spiritual explanation of a situation, while in my observation, some of my colleagues often take things the way they are without much spiritual analysis of the situation. Though in a sense that reveals the aspect of my cultural bias, at the same time it shows others' cultural bias because even if not everything must be viewed from a spiritual perspective, it is also not correct to ignore the impact of the spiritual sphere in the physical realities.

Ting-Toomey (2022, p. 39) suggests four basic rules to help understand another person. In leadership, the leader should: (1) learn to see things from the other person's cultural values, (2) make an effort to understand the cultural reason for why a person behaves the way she/he does, (3) carefully observe and notice identical and complex issues in the cultural values of that person, (4) listen and make connections to the repeated words and nonverbal nuances that are being expressed by the person. This last rule stands out the most for me. I have been exercising it in my life and that has often helped me, on different occasions, to notice hidden intentions and the true nature of people around me. Many people do not pay attention to repeated words when those repeated words, concepts, questions, body movements, or gestures are not frequent in vain they communicate something either people's intention, fear, or character.

Another crucial tool to be used in the process of understanding another person is to show empathy toward others. According to Chuck Crose, many scholars define empathy as 'the capacity to share or understand the experiences of another person, including her/his thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and perceptions... sensing how someone else sees a situation' (2019, p. 21). Based on this definition, empathy is not an easy task, but it is still very central to mutual understanding. People are who they are for a reason. So, having the courage to discover the reason behind people's behaviors, attitudes, perspectives, and words is a sign of maturity.

The second component: the ability to develop personal intercultural values

I would like to suggest ten intercultural values the Christian leader must faithfully incorporate in his/her leadership for effectiveness in a multicultural context:

- **Loving:** to love others despite their cultural values and personal condition, is very important. It is often easier to love those who act like us or who share the same cultural patterns than to show interest in people who are completely different from us. But as a leader, it will be necessary to learn to make an extra effort to love people who are different from us. And that can begin by starting to give others a chance to express and demonstrate their uniqueness as a way to know them more.

- **Caring:** Some people seem careless, even if we try to care for their wellbeing. However, even in such a situation, the Christian leader should continue to search for the well-being of every member of the team. The leader will commit himself/herself to learning to consider other people's problems like his/hers and initiate appropriate means for solution.

- **Unconditional acceptance:** I have noticed in some cases that physical appearance, gender, and religious background conditioned the acceptance of others in a group. But a leader should always remember that all human belong to God, no matter their physical appearance, gender, or religious background, and that God does care for each one of them in a very special and unique way. Therefore, the leader should learn to represent God's heart to the people he/she is leading. The leader should learn to appreciate everyone's 'cultural uniqueness' in light of the fundamental vision and mission of the organization (Greenberg, 2020, p. 61) for efficiency, peace, and mutual consideration.

- **Tolerating:** As it said above, our mind is shaped by our culture. That means, regularly, there will be misunderstandings happening in any team not necessarily because people do not love one another but just because they do not primarily see things in the same direction, and that is related to their background and cultural patterns. Now, the leader should learn to understand the intention behind each person's thoughts and ideas before rejecting, accepting, or making a final decision.

- **Mutual dialogue:** Mutual dialogue is very important when two or three people are gathered because dialogue maximizes mutual understanding and acceptance. The Christian leader should develop a regular meeting with his/her team members without discrimination to exchange ideas and plan together. The leader should avoid rejecting followers' concerns and complaints before listening to them personally or in a group.

- **Generosity:** Love is an abstract word, but when it is accompanied by some practical actions, it makes sense. Even God's love for humanity was proved through the death of His Son Jesus at the cross for our sins (John 3:16). The leader will also learn to prove his/her love through acts of generosity by offering either his/her time to listen to others and/ or by providing material and financial support when it is needed.

- **Hospitality:** In a multicultural context, people can be new to one another and feel themselves as foreigners in the organization. So, the Christian leader should be accessible to listen to others. He/she must be available to receive others and provide appropriate supports to them. The leader should also learn with moderation to also open the door of his/her house to welcome others and to shelter them. I want to emphasize that hospitality must be done with moderation because the leader should also care for the well-being of his/her family while caring for

the members of the organization or group. If the family condition of the leader does not allow at a particular time to receive others, the leader can transfer or send the person in need of shelter to the appropriate place.

- **Forgiveness:** Forgiveness is connected to tolerance. No one on this earth has ever made a mistake. Even a Christian leader has his/her weaknesses and areas of failure. Therefore, the leader needs to learn to ask for forgiveness when he/she offends the members of the team, and also accept to forgive others when they offend him/her. Forgiveness is necessary because it repairs relationships and rebuilds mutual trust.

- **Mutual collaboration:** A leader is not powerful on his/her own. However, the power of the leader is made through his/her perfect collaboration with his/her team members in the meetings.

- **Teamwork:** This is connected with mutual collaboration. A Christian leader does not have all capacities, all gifts, all strengths, all wisdom, and all knowledge, but every member of the team has a particular strength, a particular wisdom for the advancement of the organization. So, it is the responsibility of the leader to notice the particular gifts of each member of the team/ organization to strengthen and accomplish the vision of the team or organization.

In addition to the above list, Stefan Seiler (2007, p. 5) says that 'in order to be a successful leader in an intercultural environment, one needs to have a certain level of meta-cognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral intercultural competence' to be able to read or notice someone's mood, personality, and if possible, someone's intention as well, so that mechanisms or strategies may be developed to motivate the followers when it is needed or to rebuke a bad manner among the followers if it is needed.

The third component: the ability to establish personal communication manners

Guo-Ming Chen says that there are a lot of challenges regarding intercultural communication that require particular attention because 'new media has brought human interaction and society to a highly interconnected and complex level, but at the same time, challenges the very existence of intercultural communication in its traditional sense' (2012). That is because during intercultural communication, 'positive or negative intentions are inferred and filtered through the mental auditing process' which constitutes questioning the culture-based or the person-based of each follower (Ting-Toomey, 2022, p. 29). For that reason, there is an absolute need for the Christian leader to work on his/her communication style. Below, I am listing five domains to consider in establishing personal communication manners:

a. Dealing with ethnocentrism

The Christian leader needs to avoid ethnocentrism, which means appearing before others as if his/her cultural norms and values are the most valuable or universal to others. When communicating, the leader must avoid making a lot of emphasis on personal cultural patterns to the detriment of other cultural patterns because everyone is the result of what was offered to him or her through personal background, environment, and culture. So, typically speaking, everyone is special and unique. Though every culture has negative issues to deal with, every culture is special and has essential beauty to appreciate. Therefore, the leader should fight and avoid ethnocentrism so he/she can learn to appreciate others while giving credit to his/her cultural values without taking advantage of others' cultural values. The leader should instead develop 'appropriateness, effectiveness and adaptability' while interacting with each person within his/her team (Ting-Toomey, 2022, p. 36).

b. Listening with empathy

The leader should learn to listen with empathy to enable him/her to connect the word or the verbal message with the intention and the passion/non-verbal message being expressed in someone else's speech. An exceptional accent has been placed on empathy in this paper because, without empathy, other people's concerns or situations can appear to make no sense in a multicultural context. But when we deeply listen to them, we find out what their words cannot express correctly. Without empathy, someone can quickly judge or condemn others without deeply understanding them, without knowing where they come from or where they wish to go. As said above, our cultural patterns and values shape our minds. So, it is incorrect to judge someone before getting to know the facts influencing his/her mind, thoughts, or actions in a particular situation.

c. Keeping eye contact

The Christian leader should keep eye contact while interacting with someone else, so he/she may be able to notice the non-verbal expression in someone's speech. Most of the time, it is possible to lie with our words but our nonverbal communication often cannot lie because it provides or clarifies information beyond our words or confirms what is being said. Sometimes, non-verbal communication is unconscious, but it draws from the emotion and intention being expressed in verbal communication. That is why keeping eye contact is important to avoid being manipulated by someone. A person can pronounce nice words, while his/her gestures communicate the opposite. Another example is that, with our words, we can say 'yes' to a request. But when we are not interested in the request presented, our attitude will demonstrate it in one way or another. That is why, in some situations, online communication and written communication are not appropriate because many valuable truths can be hidden.

d. Dealing with high and low communication context

The Christian leader needs to intentionally learn to balance between high and low communication contexts. The leader may not assume that everyone around him will be, act, or think like him/her. However, the leader must

develop skills to help navigate different contexts successfully. Sometimes, the process can be difficult mostly when it involves questioning or opposing too many personal cultural values of the leader. For example, I grew up in a high context communication environment where everyone was free to express their concerns, ideas and desires in a polite way without being judged. That means I may need extra effort to cooperate with someone from a low-context communication environment where people are afraid to express what is in their hearts. Before, I used to consider people from low-communication contexts as hypocrites. But after learning about the different ways of communicating as part of the cultural patterns in the world, I am now adjusting my thinking concerning them. However, it is important to mention that high and low communication contexts have strengths and weaknesses to bear in mind. Therefore, each one based on his/her cultural pattern must make an effective use of its strengths and be committed to avoiding its weaknesses' side. People from the low communication context have a great possibility of falling into hypocrisy while people from high communication may quickly fall into arrogance/pride. Above all, the fact is that the leader must cooperate with others' cultural patterns and values without forcing them to shift to his/her own and at the same time, without totally denying personal cultural patterns, because it is also important for the followers to know their leader's cultural patterns.

e. Prompt questions for clarifications

The Christian leader needs to ask questions for clarity and precision before concluding something being expressed by someone. Often, we wrongly understand others and judge them because we did not take time to clearly understand them. It is important to verify our understanding by asking some additional questions. However, personally, some years ago, I was not appreciating much when someone tried to ask me a question by repeating exactly what I had been saying because I was tempted to think that the person was not paying much attention to what I was saying. But later, I acknowledged that it is sometimes very important to ask questions by repeating exactly what the person was saying to confirm if what you understood is really what the person was saying.

II. Conclusion

This paper aimed to demonstrate that a well-sound communication style based on self-identity and world-knowledge conditions effective leadership in a multicultural context since a multicultural context presents a lot of complex situations which need to be taken into consideration. The central question was: how Christian leaders effectively boost their leadership with a well-sound communication style in a multicultural context? Through exploring scholarly research, this paper has demonstrated that a well-sound communication style in a multicultural context has three major components (1) the ability to understand personal identity and others' cultural patterns, (2) the ability to develop personal intercultural values, (3) the ability to establish personal communication manners.

The paper had two major points. Apart from a short introduction and a conclusion, the first point focused on the complexity of a multicultural context; and the second point focused on the three major components of a well-sound communication style. The paper has proved that though a multicultural context is crucial, very complex, and very demanding, with appropriate strategies and discipline, such as a well-sound communication style, it is still possible to do effective leadership in a multicultural organization where followers or members are from diverse contexts and cultures. The paper concluded by emphasizing the call for extra effort by the leader to be able to objectively establish his/her communication style for effective leadership, which will enable him/her to lead the followers from point A to point B in communal harmony and mutual acceptance among the members of the organization.

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